

# Getting it right at work

by Dr David Harris PhD

*The type of work you do - and when and where you do it - has a significant impact on your physical and mental wellbeing. Dr David Harris PhD is Director of Research and Development at AlphaOne, a research-based workplace health and productivity program. Here he looks at the complex relationship between your job and your health and fitness, highlighting the unique health characteristics of particular occupations and how these can be turned to your advantage for improved health, fitness and quality of life.*

## How to Make Your Workplace Work for Your Health and Fitness

You are what you do. Look at any job and you will find a unique health profile for that occupation. A sheep shearer burns over 5,000 calories per day, whereas an office worker struggles to burn the number of calories needed to simply remain conscious! Politicians, on-call doctors and long-haul truck drivers are among the most sleep-deprived. Politicians are the most likely to die of cirrhosis of the liver. Farmers, medical workers and lawyers have some of the highest rates of depression and suicide.

This situation can be viewed in a negative way, but there is also a positive side. With some planning and energy, you can turn your work to your advantage (at least to the extent that it impacts on your health and fitness).

## Accentuate the Positives in Your Chosen Field

Each job has its own health profile. This profile is surprisingly stable, often remaining relatively unchanged over decades, despite the fact that the people in those jobs come and go. There is something about an industry itself that sustains the health (and illness!) profile of the workers within it.

These patterns within your chosen field are likely to be one of the reasons you love your work, or alternatively one of the things that irks you about your job. First-response workers, such as fire-fighters and police, frequently cite disturbed sleep as an occupational hazard. Yet at the same time they say how much they love their work and thrive on the excitement, the collegiality and the contribution they make to society. The challenge for fire-fighters and police officers is to develop strategies to minimise sleep disturbance, such as managing their sleep environment and having a pre-sleep routine, so they are better able to enjoy the rewards of their job.

So your first step in using your work to your health and fitness advantage is to identify patterns in your occupation that work for and against you, then develop a plan that minimises the negatives and accentuates the positives.

## Making Work Work for You

Work can be a great place to make healthy changes. There are three theoretical avenues for change at work:

1. individual
2. team
3. environmental / organisational

Research shows that any one of these avenues can have some benefits, but that by combining them you can achieve more substantial and longer-lasting change.

### 1. Do it Yourself

Individual change factors are often called your 'intrinsic drivers' because they are inside your head - factors such as your motivation to change, knowledge about how to change and confidence that you can change. The most widely used theory to explain individual change is the 'readiness to change' model, which says that you move through five stages as you change a behaviour. These are:

1 pre-contemplation	not thinking of changing
2 contemplation	thinking of changing
3 preparation	taking steps to change
4 action	have changed in the past 6 months
5 maintenance	have changed for more than 6 months

Of course, this model also includes 'relapse', where you take a step or two backwards! Just remember that a relapse is not a failure, it is simply part of the change process.

Let's look at a real-life example of this individual change process at work. Joe is a 36-year-old technician in a power company. Married with kids and studying part-time, he is very busy. He thought he was managing OK, but a health and fitness assessment at work changed his thinking. The assessment included a Code of Fitness that compared Joe's medical, physical and mental health profile with the demands of his job. His results placed him in the high risk category for injury. The results were confidential, so his job was not at risk, but Joe's image of himself as 'indestructible' was badly rattled. He became determined to improve by the time he was due for his next annual assessment. Joe went on to become a regular exerciser. Within 12 months, he had lost 30kg, lowered his blood pressure and quit smoking.

This example illustrates a successful execution of one of the most formidable transitions in the personal change process. This is to move from precontemplation, a stage where the risk factors exist and yet you're not thinking of changing, to contemplation, preparation and action. The theory says that to move a precontemplator along the change continuum, it is helpful to challenge their sense of 'self'. This certainly worked in Joe's case!

### 2. There is No 'I' in Team

The second avenue of change that work offers is the power of the group. People are social creatures and interactions with others are among the most powerful influences on our health habits.

Let's look at another example to better understand the power of the group to help you succeed in your fitness goals. Susan is a 51-year-old team leader in a contact centre. During a workplace health program, she started to think about doing regular exercise. She had never enjoyed exercise and found it uncomfortable. Some of her female workmates started an informal swimming group that met twice a week at the local pool. Susan was a poor swimmer, but was persuaded to join them one morning. She loves the cool, clean feel of the water and soon becomes a regular. To help her swim, she wears fins on her feet and she uses a kickboard when her arms get tired. The swim group decide to enter a team in a local Swim Across the Lake event. Susan swallows her pride and enters with them, wearing her fins and using her kickboard. She loved it and said that next year she may even do it without the kickboard.

### 3. Consider Your Work and Home Environment

Your environment is the third avenue of influence on your behaviour. In a recent unpublished study, the eating habits of workers at staff meetings were monitored. At some meetings, sweet biscuits and cakes were made available. At other meetings, a bowl of fruit was offered. A third group were offered biscuits and cakes, as well as fruit. Can you guess the outcome?

In the first group, the workers ate the biscuits and cake. The second group ate the fruit. In the third group, where biscuits, cake *and* fruit were available, all these were eaten. In other words, when you're hungry, you will eat what is within reach. The take-home message from this is that if you're trying to improve your eating habits, it's a good idea to make those healthy choices easy by surrounding yourself with tasty, healthy snacks such as fresh fruit, vegetables and trail mix, and by limiting your access to unhealthy foods. **UF**

